

511 Ridesharing Focus Group Findings Report

Submitted by Wolfe/Doyle Advertising

I. Background

Focus groups were conducted in December, 2001, among Bay Area carpoolers who searched for ridesharing information within the past 6 months. The purpose of this research was to understand attitudes and behaviors related to rideshare information usage, in general and with respect to the current RIDES.org site and a future, enhanced version of that site. These findings (and other learning) will be applied primarily to marketing communications planning and product development in preparation for the Bay Area launch of the Web Portal. A secondary application of these findings will be for planning 511 phone services, which will offer carpool and vanpool information as a key component.

II. Methodology

Focus groups were conducted in two locations -- Berkeley and Rohnert Park -- in order to include residents from 4 Bay Area counties where ridesharing is most prevalent. The groups involved a total of 12 participants, recruited according to the following criteria:

- Aged 30-54
- HHI \$20,000+ (one group \$20K - \$50K, one group \$80K-\$120K)
- Commute to work in a carpool or vanpool at least twice a week*
- Reside in Alameda, Solano, Napa, or Sonoma County
- Have searched for or requested ridesharing information within the past 6 months
- Use the internet for personal use at least twice a week
- Are potentially interested in a Web site exclusively for Bay Area carpooling/vanpooling

The criteria for recruiting participants were established on the basis of usage demographics revealed by the RIDES Commute Profile 2001, as well as on the basis of target audience discussions with MTC management and its agencies.

The focus groups agenda was structured to cover four key areas of discussion:

1. Category definition, salience, and options -- A topline discussion of how participants define rideshare information, its importance, what their options are for this type of information, and how they choose between those options.

* Although this research was open to vanpoolers as well as carpoolers, only one vanpooler was found in the recruiting process. Hence, these became de facto carpooling groups. For this reason, this report refers to

"carpoolers" instead of "carpoolers and vanpoolers". However, when referring to the type of information respondents said they look for, this information is generally referred to as "rideshare" information, because a few respondents seemed to be interested in both vanpool and carpool information

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2. Usage occasion/relevance -- An exploration of the specific factors that trigger awareness and usage of any/all sources of rideshare information, with emphasis on when these trigger occur, how they may vary, and how they influence information search/selection.

3. Current RIDES.org as an option -- Based on a homework assignment, a discussion of factors that would encourage or discourage trial and usage of the current site, including specific likes/dislikes.

4. Enhanced rideshare web site as an option -- A group exercise to "build" an ideal rideshare information service, to see how many of the planned features for the enhanced site would arise spontaneously. This would be followed by a review, evaluation, and discussion of enhanced rideshare information features, and a brief exercise to explore perceptions of what types of people would/would not be likely to use the new rideshare information site.

Note: The Berkeley group consisted of 5 casual carpoolers, with just 1 regularly scheduled carpooler. The Rohnert Park group all participated in more structured, regularly scheduled carpools that were mostly formed through their workplace.

Specific questions and all group discussion were recorded on videocassettes, which will be made available to MTC. The moderator's guide is attached (Attachment A).

III. Findings

1. Category definition, salience, and options

Definition -- Respondents defined several types of "rideshare information", and the definitions from both groups generally seemed to fall into the same categories:

- orientation information -- information for people who are considering joining or forming a carpool. Such information would let potential carpoolers know what to expect in terms of basic logistics and protocols -- essentially, "FAQ" information.
- matching information -- information to match people, locations, and times for the efficient formation and maintenance of a carpool. This type of information applied to forming or joining a carpool, as well as to maintaining an established carpool. This was

the most commonly-cited type of information and clearly the most important; even the casual carpool respondents mentioned a need for it on a mobile, real-time basis.

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- financial information -- information about carpool-related costs, savings, cost-sharing protocols, and financial incentive programs.
- security information -- any information that would help assure carpoolers that they are travelling with safe, trustworthy people.
- traffic/weather -- typical car commuter information on traffic, road conditions and weather

Salience -- The consensus among both groups was that while ridesharing information is only occasionally important, the need for information on those occasions is acute. Part of what makes rideshare information seem important to respondents is its relative absence -- the information doesn't seem to be there when they need it. As demonstrated by Got Milk? and other advertising campaigns, the importance of something can be best dramatized by its conspicuous absence -- and to carpoolers, the absence of information seems quite conspicuous. Describing a change in carpool plans that left him with no ride home, one respondent complained "*I had no resource at my fingertips.*" Another respondent added "*You're reaching out in the dark, trying to figure it out yourself.*"

Almost all respondents indicated that the most important category of information is matching information. When this information is needed, it is needed quickly. However, respondents weren't sure if or where they could get an immediate listing of potential drivers or passengers for specific destinations and times.

Financial information also seemed important to most respondents, and personal safety appeared quite important to female respondents. Again, respondents didn't seem to know of a good source for either type of information.

Options -- Respondents indicated that the primary options for ridesharing information are the internet, the phone, and word-of-mouth.

a) The internet seemed best, at least theoretically, because it could provide access to an extensive database of carpool passengers, drivers, and destinations. Most importantly, the internet could provide immediate information -- as opposed to requesting information by phone and having it sent by mail. One respondent said he would like a service "*connected to like a Mapquest, and I'm going from point A to point B, at these times, and maybe it would give me hits of different people along the way.*"

Also, and again theoretically, the internet could provide electronic bulletin boards for carpoolers to post messages to one another, which respondents felt would be extremely useful. Worth noting is that although respondents favored the internet, they did not seem to feel that any rideshare information service had tapped the internet's full potential.

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b) The phone -- Reactions to getting information by phone were mostly based on experiences some respondents had calling the RIDES phone number. Generally, these experiences were positive in that the service representatives were helpful, but a significant drawback was that callers had to wait for requested information to arrive by mail. At several points in the groups, respondents emphasized that matching information needs to be available immediately and on demand.

c) Word-of-mouth -- Several respondents mentioned getting initial information about carpooling from people at work. In particular, respondents mentioned company-sponsored presentations of carpooling information, featuring a RIDES representative and brochures. These presentations seemed to offer a very good introduction to carpooling benefits, logistics and resources.

As other potential sources of information, respondents also mentioned the news media, Caltrans, the Yellow Pages, and advertising. Regarding advertising, respondents felt they would like to see more of it, hoping it could revive what seems to be waning participation and public support.

2. Usage occasion/relevance

When asked specifically when ridesharing information might be particularly important, respondents focused more on its ongoing importance than on how it was initially important to get them started ...

a) Life changes, big and small -- In particular, ridesharing information is important whenever the carpooler's life changes in a way that affects their commute. Such a change could be as minor as needing to work late or as major as changing jobs or residences. In these or similar situations, they need matching information to make an alternate carpool arrangement. However, respondents felt the necessary information isn't available or is hard to obtain.

Respondents were quite emphatic about the unpredictability of their lives, and how this unpredictability presents a particular challenge for them as carpoolers. (*"Our needs constantly change" ... "Our hours change, we move, our positions change within an*

organization" ... "Our lives aren't that stable.") Ideally, they would like a matching information service that is complete and immediate enough to accommodate the changes in their lives, but their perception is that such a service doesn't exist.

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b) En route -- An equally salient but more frequent need for matching information is among casual carpoolers, who need it in a "live" mobile format. While they are en route, drivers need assurance they can quickly find passengers, and vice versa. Accordingly, casual carpoolers would like to know at a moment's notice if, when, and where drivers or passengers are available for a given destination. Such information would save them time and frustration in situations when there are no passengers or, more commonly, no drivers at a casual carpool pickup location.

c) During emergencies -- A few respondents mentioned that emergencies such as transit strikes, or other emergencies affecting transit systems, can trigger an urgent need for rideshare information. In these situations, respondents felt that a number of transit users would turn to carpooling as an alternate means of transportation.

d) For short trips -- Respondents in the Rohnert Park group mentioned that carpooling is not generally considered for shorter trips under 30 minutes ("*Sometimes it's just a last-minute need and people don't want to commit to a carpool.*") However, if information were available to specifically enable short-trip carpooling, respondents felt this information would be very useful and would promote more frequent use of carpooling.

3. Reactions to RIDES.org

Prior to the groups, respondents were asked to visit RIDES.org and come prepared to discuss their reactions to the site. As previously mentioned, practically none of the respondents had any prior awareness of RIDES.org. Those who were aware had searched the web for "carpooling" information or had heard about the site at their job.

Reactions to the site were consistent across groups and quite straightforward:

a) The site seems appropriate for "novice" carpoolers, in large part because it seemed to lack the kind of matching information that experienced carpoolers need -- Matching information (specifically, the "matchlist" feature on the site) seemed buried. Many respondents didn't find it, and some who did find it couldn't get immediate results. One respondent said he had "*hoped it would be a Web site where you could put in your user name and bring up your matchlist, and kind of re-check it for yourself every single time.*"

Another felt "*There was more information on that site than I needed,*" adding: "*I was looking to get to the matchlist entry form -- right now -- and hoping to get some feedback -- right now -- which of course I didn't. I thought it was very dressed up and quite a production, but I was looking for very specific information.*"

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Also, some respondents seemed to feel that the tone of the site was too glib, cheery and rah-rah about carpooling. As a respondent in the Berkeley group said, "*We want to hear 'carpooling sucks... here's how we can help you'.*"

Consequently, respondents came away feeling that the site was dominated by "getting started" information that is no longer relevant to experienced carpoolers. Comments ranged from the more positive "*Okay as a primer*" to the more negative "*lame*" and geared to "*the lowest common denominator*".

b) The incentives information on the site attracted attention -- Respondents' eyes seemed drawn to this information and they clicked on it with interest. However, they seemed to want more information on financial perks than the site currently offers.

In addition, a couple of respondents mentioned that they thought the site would or should include carpooling statistics such as usage trend data, and looked for this type of information but couldn't find any. When asked why they might be interested in such information, respondents in the Berkeley group mentioned a suspicion that participation in carpooling is flat or declining, and they wanted to know if that's true.

4. The ideal rideshare information service

Discussion of an ideal ridesharing information service was prompted by an exercise in which respondents were paired and asked to collaborate on conceptually building a service from scratch. Collectively, the ideal services that respondents created reflect five common themes:

- Highly sophisticated, online ride-matching capabilities
- More explicit, attractive financial incentives
- A channel for carpoolers to communicate with one another
- Safety measures
- Mobile, non-computer access to information

The remainder of this section looks at each of these themes in more detail ...

a) Highly sophisticated, online ride-matching capabilities -- Respondents seemed to want richer and more instant, personalized, and configurable matching information. In order to yield such information, they thought of ways to leverage the power of the internet.

Suggestions included: a profiling function for entering and updating relevant personal data and facilitating useful matches; an e-mail confirmation of matches; and a special section or function for matching people with short-distance or short-term carpooling needs.

As discussed earlier, respondents said they feel their lives are somewhat unstable and that their schedules and transportation needs change fairly often. Yet, the notion of traditional carpooling is that it's more suitable for people with very structured schedules and routine commuting patterns. By "inventing" more sophisticated ride-matching systems, respondents showed a desire to change the highly structured heritage of traditional carpooling. Information technology, and the internet, seem to provide the right tools and timing to effect this change. Respondents appeared optimistic that, with the right application of information technology, carpooling could be as flexible as their lives and transportation needs are variable.

b) More explicit, attractive financial incentives were, for several respondents, an integral part of an "ideal" information service. These respondents seemed to feel that carpoolers deserve nice financial perks, but that information on such incentives needs to be better disseminated and promoted. Ideally, incentives would include discounts on cars, gas, automotive products, insurance, or registration. No one seemed sure whether such incentives exist, but felt they should be created if they don't. Also, they felt that promoting these incentives would encourage carpooling, especially among people who currently drive alone. As one respondent stated, *"Let's face it, you're going to have to buy people out of their cars."*

c) A channel for carpoolers to communicate with one another was suggested in both groups and by casual as well as formal carpoolers. Some of the casual carpoolers suggested a phone dispatch system, through which riders and passengers could leave messages regarding their whereabouts and estimated arrival times. Formal carpoolers suggested electronic bulletin boards (*"like Craigs List"*) where messages could be posted regarding rides wanted or rides offered, or to schedule changes among known members within a carpool. Among other benefits, respondents felt such a bulletin board might encourage spontaneous use of carpooling for temporary commutes, one-time trips, or shorter commutes.

d) Safety measures -- Respondents in both groups generally agreed they feel uncomfortable carpooling with relative or complete strangers, but the discomfort was particularly strong among women and particularly with respect to the thought of abduction. Some of the women flatly stated they would not get in a car with men they don't know for any reason, carpooling included. As one woman said, *"Something that does stop alot of people is fear of strangers ... so some kind of driving record or, I won't say 'background search' because that really sounds bad, but something so the guy's not a hatchet murderer."*

This comment prompted discussion in the Rohnert Park group, with all respondents seeming to share the perception that safety concerns among carpoolers are quite warranted. As a simpler and more socially acceptable measure than background checks, one respondent suggested a ride matching service that gave women the option to select women-only carpools. This suggestion was quite popular with the group.

e) Mobile, non-computer access to information -- Respondent teams in both groups conceived of kiosks and mobile phone services so that they could get ridesharing information while they were on the road, and to provide information access for people without computers. Both the kiosk and mobile phone ideas seemed more popular among casual carpoolers, who looked at these service concepts as providing a master control center for real-time coordination between casual carpool drivers and passengers. The desired effect would be to make casual carpooling more reliable, without imposing the rigidity with which formal carpools are structured.

5. RIDES.org features

Respondents were given a set of six features describing possible enhancements to a rideshare web site, and were asked to rank and discuss the importance of these features (see attachment B).

Of the six features, five were ranked 4.2 or higher on a scale where "1" was "not at all important" and "5" was "very important". These generally high ratings indicate that, overall, ridesharing information was viewed as quite important, confirming the findings discussed in the "Salience" section (III.1) of this report.

Note that since this was qualitative research, figures such as these represent the thinking of the focus group respondents, and should not be projected to a larger group. However, these findings should help identify if and why certain features were felt to be more important than others.

a) The leading feature was that "A 'search' function will help you find specific rideshare commute information" -- This feature was ranked an average of 4.7, the highest importance ranking of the six features described to respondents. However, it was selected as the single most important feature by only 8% of respondents. What this indicates is that this feature had broad appeal, but perhaps not very intense appeal -- a logical deduction given that search functions seem to have become a common and expected "must have" for information Web sites in general.

b) The second leading feature was that "You will be able to ... get carpool and vanpool partners immediately online" -- This was ranked an average of 4.4 and selected as the most important feature by 33% of respondents. Worth noting is that this feature was ranked higher in Rohnert Park than Berkeley. A likely reason is that the Berkeley group included casual carpoolers, for whom listings of permanent carpool partners are probably less important. Hence, if we looked at formal carpoolers only, this feature would likely be ranked even higher.

The reason this feature was seen as important is that it would help carpoolers find new carpools if they changed jobs or residences, or additional or temporary carpools if their work schedules changed. Here again, respondents said that adjusting their carpooling routines to these sorts of changes can be frustrating, and they need a resource that can help.

c) Two features of tertiary importance were that "You will be able to ... see a list of vanpools that have available seats" and "You will be able to request pre-tax commuter benefits information for your company or HR Director" -- The vanpool feature was ranked an average of 4.3 and selected as most important by 25% of respondents, primarily by those who had considered vanpooling in the past and would like to consider it further. The corresponding figures for the pre-tax benefits feature were 4.2 and 17%. Respondents saw financial benefits as important to boost the popularity of carpooling, but didn't mention any personal importance (perhaps because they didn't want to appear needy or selfish).

d) The two features of lesser importance to respondents were: "The site will provide commute-specific transit itineraries, Park & Ride lots, and carpool (HOV) lanes" and "Intelligent interactive maps will let you click on a location to find the nearest Park & Ride lot and/or carpool/HOV lane". These features were ranked 4.2 and 3.7, respectively, and only one respondent selected either of them as the most important feature.

6. Who would use the new service?

As a wrap-up exercise, respondents were given a sheet depicting men and women from 12 different occupations and lifestyles, and were asked to indicate which of the people shown were "most likely to use the new Rideshare information Web site." Most of the men and women depicted were chosen to represent the same approximate age and income groups as the respondents. A variety of professions and lifestyles were represented (listed below).

The primary purpose of the exercise was to see how narrow or broad respondents would be in their selections. A secondary objective was to see if any common demographic or psychographic themes seemed to emerge from their selections.

On average, respondents chose 9 out of 12 people as "most likely users" of an enhanced rideshare web site, indicating that they perceived the site as having potentially very broad utility and appeal.

To the extent that any professions/lifestyles were over-selected, those selection skewed toward finance professions (financial advisor and accountant) and people in socially interactive jobs (HR Director and event planner). Professions or lifestyles that seemed under-selected were middle-aged white males with fairly independent jobs (radio DJ and insurance salesman).

The results of this exercise were as follows: ethnic female HR Director (selected by 100% of respondents); female accountant (92%); ethnic male financial advisor (92%); ethnic female event planner (83%); male maintenance worker (75%); female attorney (75%); male Sierra club advocate (75%); ethnic female working mother (75%); ethnic male cook (67%); female waitress (67%); male radio DJ (50%) and male insurance salesman (50%).

7. Incidental Findings

- A subtle theme that emerged at different points in the focus groups is that carpooling seems to be fading somewhat in terms of support, awareness, and maybe participation -- Respondents indicated there seems to be less "buzz" about carpooling. A few suggested that carpooling programs be advertised more aggressively in the media and supported more prominently by employers. Others felt that financial incentives might help rekindle the public's interest. Most agreed that, to attract new participants, carpooling needed to be made more convenient by providing better information in general, and better matching information in particular. Referring to the attempt to match drivers and passengers, a Berkeley respondent said his impression is that *"it's not working as well as it could ... there are too many variables or not enough people signed up."*
- A second incidental finding was that carpoolers seem interested in the CityCarShare program (www.citycarshare.com), and feel it's relevant to carpoolers and carpooling information. This indicates that carpoolers could be an excellent target audience for the CityCarShare program, and the program might help carpoolers feel like they have an additional resource for meeting the challenge of changing transportation needs.

IV. Assessments and Implications

1. Positioning

- The enhanced rideshare web site should be positioned as the source of immediate matching information that makes ridesharing easier for people whose needs change -- Immediate matching information should be the foundation of the new site because the perceived lack of such information has clearly been frustrating to carpoolers, and it's the type of information for which they seem to have the strongest and most frequent need. This is not to say that other features and content shouldn't receive attention, but that the most attractive feature and compelling need should come first.

Ideally, this positioning would be supported by fairly sophisticated technologies that would:

- allow users to create profiles of their transportation needs and preferences
- provide on-demand matches for specified start and end points and travel times
- accept multiple and variable requests from users and provide multiple matches

For example, a woman passenger should be able to specify that she wants to share a carpool with other women who are non-smokers, and travel to two jobs in different locations on different days -- and instantly receive as many matches as there are in the database.

This positioning is focused, targeted, and leverages an inevitable phenomenon -- life's changes. Many aspects of the focus groups discussions revealed the extent to which the carpooler's life changes in ways that makes carpooling an ongoing challenge. This positioning conveys the site as a solution to those changes and challenges.

- Implicit in the recommended positioning is that the enhanced site should be more clearly targeted to experienced carpoolers and vanpoolers -- The site should continue to include orientation information for beginners, but the role and presence of such information should be much less dominant. This research made clear that a carpooler's need for ridesharing information is ongoing, and it would be alienating for the experienced user to repeatedly visit a site that seemed geared toward novices.

2. Positioning of Web service versus phone service

- The phone-based service should reflect the same basic positioning as the Web service, only perhaps more discreetly -- Given that at least preliminary matching information seems like it can be obtained instantly over the phone, and that ride matching appears to be the primary role of the phone service, it makes sense to position the phone service in the same way as the Web service. From a communications standpoint, a clear and common focus is efficient and effective.

However, a more discreet approach is recommended for the phone service -- meaning that if we want people to know where to get instant matching information, we should be screaming about the Web site, but only whispering about the phone service. There are two reasons for this assessment. First, respondents in this research seemed to prefer the Web to the phone for carpooling information. Second, Wolfe/Doyle test calls to the RIDES call center showed that while the customer service representatives were extremely courteous, the matching process was somewhat cumbersome when conducted verbally through a trial-and-error series of travel time and destination scenarios.

In one call, we were looking for an early morning ride from San Francisco to SFO and were given the name of an employee at Northwest Airlines who is also looking for a ride. When we expanded our desired travel time by only 30 minutes, and asked to expand the geographic radius of our destination point, five potential carpools emerged from the database. This kind of verbal, iterative search process was effective but somewhat slow and uncomfortable compared to what could potentially be done over the Web. In another call, the service representative steered us toward providing our information and waiting to receive match information by mail.

- For either source of matching information -- the phone or the Web -- policies regarding providing "instant" answers should be revisited -- Currently, RIDES.org does not provide online matching information on demand due to technological limitations. However, we know that RIDES plans to implement the new online ride-matching software program later this year, which should address this fundamental problem. Although instant matching is supposed to be available over the phone, we had a RIDES customer service representative explain that they try to avoid giving matching information to people who may not yet be fully committed to ridesharing ("*we don't want alot of 'maybes' in the system*"). Bottomline, there is a gap between the immediacy that carpoolers want and what RIDES currently provides. The purpose of raising this issue here is to ask, how soon and how completely can this gap be narrowed? We need answers to these questions as they have strong implications for the recommended positioning, and whether and how to promote the Web service versus the phone service.

- Information on financial incentives, including pre-tax commuter benefits, should be promoted on the web service rather than the phone service. This is plan-ahead information that lends itself to online research.

- Worth knowing, for future reference, is the viability of an automated phone service that delivers real-time matching information for casual carpoolers -- If a phone system could capture and disseminate, in real time, the en-route location and destination of drivers looking for passengers, and do the same for en-route passengers looking for drivers, this could be a great boon to casual carpooling. Whether casual carpooling is, could, or should be within the scope of MTC information services is not being assumed here. However, if casual carpooling were within the scope of such services, it seems obvious that casual carpoolers want a mobile phone-based service with real-time matching functionality. Current or imminent technologies could make such a service viable.

If a mobile phone service were developed to facilitate and encourage casual carpooling, it should be positioned accordingly. In this case, phone and Web services would be positioned somewhat differently, in that the phone would provide instant matching for casual carpools, while the Web delivered instant matching for formal carpools.

3. Target audience

- The recommended target audience for an enhanced rideshare web site is fairly broad, demographically, but is well-defined and distinct in terms of psychographics.

Demographically, the recommended target for a rideshare site is derived from the demographic statistics for carpoolers in the RIDES Commute Profile 2001: skewed to the 30-54 age group and to women, with a slight skew to both lower and higher income groups, and residing in Contra Costa, Alameda, Solano, Napa, or Sonoma County. All respondents in the focus groups were recruited according to these approximate age, income, and geographic criteria, and all responded well to the enhanced rideshare web site concept.

In terms of psychographics, the target is a bit frazzled with respect to carpooling -- it's not easy, given the lives they lead. Also, as a group they seem to feel a bit isolated or unsupported, in that they wonder why there's noticeably less buzz or hoopla about carpooling than there used to be. Money plays a role in their thinking about carpooling, and some are probably very tight-fisted about transportation costs. Their lives are generally suburban and not glamorous ... they are part of the rat race. Occasionally, they worry about the safety of carpooling with strangers, and women in particular worry about riding in cars with men.

4. Media, events, publicity

- Positive information and imagery about carpooling seems due for a resurgence, and the appropriate resources should be considered -- Whether by paid advertising, PSAs, events, public relations efforts, or a combination thereof, the public's awareness and perception of carpooling needs to be re-energized. Realistically, there is no way to evoke the kind of pervasive community and media interest that surrounded carpooling at its inception. However, good news about carpooling could boost morale among carpoolers, and renew its image as a practical and innovative solution to an urban problem. Positive news of this kind could be the announcement of a major new RIDES service or feature, or the results of a study showing that Bay Area carpooling has increased.

But perhaps even more important than specific messages is the issue of what resources are put behind them. Currently, there are several Caltrans highway signs featuring Rides phone number(s). Still, carpoolers feel like media messages supporting carpooling have simply vanished. Whether or not this is actually the case, a concerted effort to essentially re-launch carpooling seems necessary. In marketing terms, such re-launches usually involve an increase in marketing funds, the designation of a concentrated re-launch period, and the implementation of an integrated set of communications supporting a focused and appealing new message.

Certainly, more evidence is needed to confirm declining awareness or imagery for carpooling, especially since there is some evidence to the contrary. However, it is unusual to hear research respondents lament that the product or service they use isn't as broadly publicized as it used to be. The fact that this happened in both the Berkeley and Rohnert Park research is worth noting and thinking about.

- Instead of promoting a phone number to call, Caltrans highway signage for ridesharing and any future outdoor advertising should promote a Web site address -- This follows the logic that the internet is preferred to the phone as a source for carpooling information, and that instant matching information seems inherently better suited to the mechanics of the internet. By promoting a Web site address, we would be encouraging carpoolers to use an information service that they would probably be more highly satisfied with.

Given the tradition of listing phone numbers on Caltrans signage, this recommendation may seem odd or counter-intuitive. Contact information on Caltrans highway signs seems categorically oriented toward instant accessibility -- yet this could only be true in the relatively recent era of pervasive cell phone usage. Considering that society is entering an era of pervasive Web usage, and is simultaneously trying to restrict mobile phone usage while driving, this recommendation may not be so counter-intuitive after all.

- Work places are an excellent environment to promote ridesharing -- Several carpoolers indicated that they first found out about carpooling services at work-related meetings or events. They felt it was appropriate for their employer to encourage and facilitate carpooling, especially if the employer could help them get information on financial incentive programs. Also, those that mentioned the attendance of RIDES representatives, and the handing out of brochures, seemed quite satisfied with these forms of orientation. In short, this approach seems to be working. Perhaps a media "re-launch" of carpooling, as discussed above, would encourage more companies to sponsor rideshare orientation events.

5. Features to emphasize

Although several of the currently-planned enhancements should be emphasized, consideration should also be given to developing some of the new enhancements that respondents suggested during the "ideal" exercise and at various other points in the groups.

- Among the currently-planned features, those related to carpool and vanpool matching information, and those related to financial incentives, should be emphasized -- As discussed in previous sections, matching and financial features evoked a very high level of interest among respondents. However, to complement or further improve some of these features, new and additional features should be considered for development ...
- Among the features suggested by respondents, the electronic bulletin board, the women's-only carpool option, and the development of new financial incentives should all be taken under consideration -- Each of these features should be considered because each touches on a subject of high importance to carpoolers ...

An electronic bulletin board would enable people in formal carpools to leave each other messages about schedule or destination changes. It would also let them post last-minute or temporary ride wanted/offered messages. These functions would help with the previously discussed and (by now) well-established issue of how carpoolers manage life changes.

The women's-only carpooling option touches on the extremely important subject of safety. The thought of cars and male strangers in any situation -- carpooling included -- creates frightening associations for some women, and most likely discourages many from starting or continuing to carpool. This option would probably be appreciated a great deal, and might dramatically increase women's satisfaction with the service's instant matching function. In turn, women would likely generate more, and more positive, word of mouth about the site.

Information on new financial incentives seems like it would benefit carpooling in two ways: first, by improving morale among current carpoolers, and second by attracting new ones. However, to tap the power of financial incentives, it seems a greater number of them would need to be available -- from any source, whether it's the government, employers, or any consumer marketing companies that might have special offers for carpoolers. The latter raises the question of whether there is, or could be, a business development function at RIDES. Such a function could help bridge supply and demand: between carpoolers who want financial perks, and marketers who would be willing to provide such perks to such a specific and select audience.

- Although a search function was the most highly-ranked feature in terms of importance, it should not be emphasized -- Certainly such a feature should be included, but emphasizing it may not be productive. Virtually all major information Web sites have such a function, and users seem to expect them. From an information provider's perspective, search functions are a cost-of-entry feature. Hence, emphasizing this feature would put us in this over-solicitous position of trumpeting something that should be taken for granted.

6. Executional considerations for the Web site

- As previously discussed, the matchlist function is very hard to find on the current site; on any future versions of the site, this function needs to visually dominate -- When respondents visited the current site as a homework assignment, many were expecting a ride matching function, and yet couldn't find one. This indicates that, even as a short-term fix, this function needs to be flagged much more prominently. In the long-term, an enhanced site should be designed primarily around this function, so that it is as much a visual centerpiece as, say, a fountain in a plaza.

- A theme of life changes, both big and small, should prevail on the site in terms of overall design and imagery -- Obviously, an enhanced site will offer many types of information. However, the *main* reason for a carpooler to go to a rideshare information *Web site* is to summon the power of the internet for the otherwise difficult task of getting on-demand matching information. That's a job that really seems to require a Web site versus, say, brochures, presentations, or word-of-mouth. Also, this theme touches on the apparently strongest emotional and rational reasons for needing ongoing carpooling information.

- Create a separate section for newcomers and orientation information -- People who are new to carpooling should be welcome at the site, but the site should not seem like it's primarily for them. This is a very important consideration for bringing the experienced user back to the site on a repeated, as-needed basis. There's no point in alienating the majority of experienced carpoolers for the sake of a minority that's just getting started.
- Financial information should also be more prominent, and more exciting -- Financial incentives seem to be the one carpooling-related subject that's truly exciting and stress-free. All other aspects seem to have a little stress or worry attached. To take advantage of the uniquely uplifting nature of these incentives, the site might give this content more prominence and a more vibrant, celebratory feel -- perhaps with new placement within the site as well as new imagery, colors, and copy.
- Make good news prominent -- Maintaining the morale of carpoolers seems to depend in part on a collective sense that carpooling is really "working" in the Bay Area. Any good news about the growth, success, or evolution of Bay Area carpooling should make the front page of the Web site.
- RIDES.org was the only transportation Web site that was not criticized for its design -- In focus groups among traffic, transit, and bicycling information users, the corresponding Web sites were all criticized for a lackluster or text-heavy appearance. This doesn't mean there's no room for design enhancements to RIDES.org, but it does indicate that a redesign is not urgent for ridesharing as it is for other sites.

On judgment, the reason why design aspects may be somewhat more important for traffic, transit and bicycling is that a key aspect of information for each of those modes is a map. Geographic and spatial visualization seemed essential for the navigational information that people seek at traffic, transit, and bicycling sites. For carpooling information, however, navigation and maps don't seem to enter the picture as much, if at all. Consequently, geographic and spatial visualization is not at a premium, and perhaps visuals don't matter quite as much overall.
